Contents

List of Illustrations viii
Preface ix
Acknowledgments xiii
Introduction: Traitor, Turncoat, and Tyrant xvii

Part 1: Santa Anna's Early Life, 1794–1823
1. Between the Volcano and the Sea, 1794–1810 3
2. An Officer and a Gentleman, 1810–1821 20
3. Liberator of Veracruz, Founder of the Republic, 1821–1823 43

Part 2: The Making of a *Caudillo*, 1823–1832
4. A Federalist on the Periphery, 1823–1825 71
5. Among the *Jarochos*, 1825–1828 88
6. General of Tricks, 1828–1832 109

Part 3: The Returns of the Phoenix, 1832–1841
7. The Absentee President, 1832–1835 133
8. The Warrior President, 1835–1837 158
9. The Landowner President, 1837–1841 184

Part 4: A Road Paved with Good Intentions, 1841–1848

10.The *Santanista* Project, 1841–1844 213
11.Our Man in Havana, 1844–1846 238
12.The Mexican-American War, 1846–1848 256

Part 5: The Autumn of the Patriarch, 1849–1876
13.The Man Who Would Be King, 1849–1855 289
14.The General in His Labyrinth, 1856–1876 317

Conclusion: "A Good Mexican" 346
Chronology 369
Notes 391
Bibliography 449
Index 477

Illustrations

Santa Anna in 1829 123
Santa Anna in 1841 195
Santa Anna in 1847 259
Santa Anna as His Serene Highness 300

Copyrighted Material

Introduction
Traitor, Turncoat, and Tyrant

The Gulf of Mexico port of Veracruz, with its notoriously insalubrious climate, was awash with light the morning of 7 October 1867. The sky was an impossible blue. Like pterodactyls from a previous era, pelicans could be seen gliding over the fortified island of San Juan de Ulúa, occasionally plunging into the shark-infested sea. Palm trees lining the waterfront in tropical splendor stood perfectly still in the morning sun. The fierce and feared *norte*, the strong wind that often prevented ships from docking, was not blowing that day. Instead the still air was humid and stifling. Smoke from gentlemen's cigars lingered around them, hanging oppressively over their troubled minds.

In the main theater of Veracruz, seventy-three-year-old General Antonio López de Santa Anna stood accused of high treason. It was the first day of the court-martial. He had been captured by the Mexican liberal forces in Yucatán in mid-July after attempting yet another remarkable political comeback. This time it was not to be. The hero of independence, six times president of the republic, who over the previous four decades had repeatedly and in the most extraordinary of circumstances succeeded in returning to power, was this time unable to pull off another miraculous recovery.

Colonel José Guadalupe Alba, the chief prosecutor, called for Santa Anna to be sentenced to death. He accused the septuagenarian and one-legged warrior of inciting the French intervention (1862–67) that had led to the imposition of a Habsburg prince, Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, on the Mexican throne. He accused Santa Anna of recognizing the illegal empire that was forged and of then changing sides and fight-

Copyrighted Material

ing for the Republicans who had forbidden his joining their struggle. He was a traitor, a turncoat, and a tyrant. If he was found guilty and the draconian law of 25 January 1862 was applied, Santa Anna's days were numbered. The aging liberator of Veracruz, "founder of the Republic," who had been forced to have his left leg amputated after he was badly wounded repulsing a French incursion into the port in December 1838, could not believe there were Mexicans who dared accuse him of treason. He was one of the strongmen, one of the chieftains, one of the *caudillos* of the War of Independence (1810–21). He had "spilt his blood in [Mexico's] defense."[1] Here was a man who believed he should be celebrated as one of Mexico's greatest men. At the height of his career he had been paraded around the streets of Veracruz on people's shoulders. And yet, that October morning, it looked very much as though he was to be condemned as a despicable criminal. Although Santa Anna would miraculously succeed in escaping the death sentence in the fall of 1867, his reputation as a traitor would accompany him for the rest of his life. To this day, more than 130 years since he died an impoverished and ostracized man in Mexico City, in the early hours of 21 June 1876, Santa Anna's name continues to be associated with treachery, tyranny, and deceit.

In Mexico this has to do with the way history is taught in schools, portrayed in the media, and commemorated on certain chosen dates. There are heroes and there are villains. History is like a Diego Rivera mural in which some people and events have been dramatically idealized, while others have been deliberately satanized. What is lacking is an overriding detached view whereby people can contemplate their history without a need to pass sentence, as a landscape in which there were not always obvious rights and wrongs, good and bad choices, saintly and demonic characters. What continues to elude the Mexican educational system is a predisposition to accept that reality is often murky, that not all heroes are virtuous, and that some villains are probably misguided (or unlucky) rather than evil.

The annual liturgy of fiestas ritualistically reinforces this view of the past: 5 May, 16 September, and 20 November. Street names repeated in every Mexican town further confirm this official version. Those who are honored during the fiesta *del grito* on the evening of 15 September,

Copyrighted Material

who have deserved a statue, whose faces have figured on peso coins, who have had a plaza named after them, become almost sacrosanct in the way that they are venerated. In contrast, those who do not figure on street maps, whose names appear in the school history textbooks only as villains, are irredeemable.

Antonio López de Santa Anna remains one of the most controversial and vilified figures of Mexican history. His career has not yet been granted a balanced evaluation. There are no monuments, statues, or streets that carry his name in the entire republic. Even the museum on the former grounds of his *hacienda* El Encero, outside the town of Xalapa in the state of Veracruz, does not have a plaque to indicate that Santa Anna lived in the area for several years. Although children across the republic sing the national anthem at school every Monday morning, few are told that it was commissioned by Santa Anna. It goes without saying that the stanzas contained in the original celebrating the virtues of Santa Anna are no longer sung. Purposefully forgotten by the authorities, he continues to appear, in school textbooks and in most historical accounts, as the leader all Mexicans (and Texans) love to hate. Any legend surrounding him can only be described as a black one. The view that he "was the exclusive cause of all of Mexico's misfortunes" still goes unquestioned by many.[2]

Santa Anna is ever represented as the unpatriotic traitor who deliberately lost the Mexican-American War in exchange for a fistful of dollars and who sold parts of Mexico to its northern neighbor in the Treaty of La Mesilla or Gadsden Purchase (1853), shamelessly pocketing the profits, his signature becoming associated with corrupt and damaging transactions.[3] Representative of this view is the conclusion of Enrique Serna's best-selling novel about Santa Anna, *El seductor de la patria* (The mother country's seducer, 1999). The character of Santa Anna predictably confesses at the end to having treated the country as if "she" were a whore: "I stole her bread and sustenance. I became rich on her poverty and her pain. . . . I have never given a damn about Mexico and her people."[4] He is the sanguinary general (as depicted in John Wayne's 1960 and John Lee Hancock's 2004 films about the battle at the Alamo) who led the bloody assault on the fortified mission and subsequently ordered the execution of Texans captured at Goliad. He appears, more-

Copyrighted Material

over, as the incompetent general who allowed the Texans to defeat the Mexican Army in 1836 while having a siesta at San Jacinto when Samuel Houston's troops were only a mile away.

Furthermore, Santa Anna is invariably presented as an opportunistic turncoat who changed sides according to necessity. He is presented as having been a royalist, an insurgent, a monarchist, a republican, a federalist, a centralist, a liberal, and a conservative, depending upon which faction was most likely to rise to power, without upholding any consistent political ideals. Proponents of such a view tend to ignore the fact that most of Santa Anna's contemporaries also changed sides as the hopes of the 1820s degenerated into the despair of the 1840s. It was a period of change, uncertainty, and experimentation, which of necessity meant that no faction remained static in its demands, and everybody's political stance evolved in response to the different stages of hope, disenchantment, profound disillusion, and despair.[5]

Santa Anna is also remembered for the 1853–55 repressive dictatorship in which he became His Serene Highness (*Su Alteza Serenísima*) and was particularly brutal in his attempts to crush the Revolution of Ayutla (1854–55). As exemplified in the title Felipe Cazals gave his 2000 film about the last days of Santa Anna's life, *Su Alteza Serenísima*, Mexicans have come to associate the caudillo with this pseudomonarchic personal appellation. Conveniently they overlook the fact that it was first donned by the idolized "father of Independence," Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. To a great extent we owe Santa Anna's depiction as a despotic tyrant to one of his enemies, liberal ideologue José María Luis Mora, who developed the highly influential view that Santa Anna "certainly desired *absolute* power" from as early as 1833. Mora called him the "Attila of Mexican civilization" and argued that he championed the cause of the privileged classes, that of the "military and clerical oligarchy." His party, in Mora's words, was made up of selfish and self-promoting high-ranking officers who had no other aim but to ensure that Santa Anna was granted absolute power. Regardless of self-contradiction, Mora also criticized Santa Anna for retiring to his hacienda instead of exercising the power he had been awarded.[6]

However, it is both misleading and inaccurate to state that dictatorships were characteristic of nineteenth-century Mexico. With reference

Copyrighted Material

to Santa Anna, historian Michael Costeloe reminds us that "despite the opportunities in 1834, 1841 and again in December 1842, he made no obvious or known attempt to establish a permanent military dictatorship."[7] Although Santa Anna is often referred to as a dictator, he acted as a dictator on only three occasions. In 1834, following the Plan of Cuernavaca (25 May), Santa Anna assumed dictatorial powers in order to reverse most of the reforms that had been passed under Vice President Valentín Gómez Farías. In 1841, following the overthrow of General Anastasio Bustamante's government (1837–41), and as was stipulated in the Bases de Tacubaya (6 October), he served as dictator until the 1843 Constitution was approved and put in place (8 June 1843). Neither in 1834 nor in 1841 was it his intention to impose a perpetual dictatorship. On both occasions a constituent congress was formed in order to draft a new constitution. It was only in 1853 that he actually attempted to forge a long-lasting dictatorship. It is this last dictatorship, characterized by its extravagance and brutal repression, that most people remember.

Moreover, his recurrent depiction as a womanizer, a gambler, and an irresponsible regional chieftain who appropriated the national treasury on the six different occasions he served as president (or eleven, according to the traditional historiography), means there is little that would appear redeemable in his career.[8] His faults are portrayed as having been so great, and his role in national politics so influential (the 1821–55 period in question continues to be called the "Age of Santa Anna"), that he has served the official Mexican version of events to account painlessly for the loss of half of its national territory in 1848. Santa Anna has become the ideal scapegoat, to be held responsible for all that went wrong after Mexico became independent from Spain. He has been so useful to this end, serving as everybody's trump card that, as noted by historian Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, if he had not existed, they would have had to invent him.[9]

Having said this, back in the nineteenth century and until the definitive triumph of Benito Juárez's faction in 1867, the view of Santa Anna was more varied. Although he was indeed vilified by a considerable number of his contemporaries, the majority admired him at one stage or another. Santa Anna was known as the liberator of Veracruz. Having defected to the insurgent cause, following the proclamation of the Plan

Copyrighted Material

of Iguala (24 February 1821), he played a major role in liberating his home province from royalist control. He also acquired fame, albeit not entirely justified, as the author of Agustín I's downfall and the founder of the Republic of Mexico. Santa Anna's role in the Republican revolt of 2 December 1822 allowed him to state on numerous occasions that he was "the first caudillo to proclaim the Republic."[10]

Moreover, on 11 September 1829 Santa Anna, together with General Manuel Mier y Terán, succeeded in defeating a Spanish expedition that had landed in Tampico in July with the intention of reconquering Mexico for Ferdinand VII. Santa Anna's victory became one of the most insistently celebrated military exploits of the early national period, and thanks to his ideologue, propagandist, and informant José María Tornel, he subsequently became known as "el héroe de Tampico." He also led the Mexican victory of 5 December 1838, on this occasion against French troops who had occupied the port of Veracruz, during the so-called French Pastry War (March 1838–April 1839). At the time, Santa Anna's role in the battle and the loss of his leg allowed him to regain his previous heroic reputation.[11]

He was celebrated with more fiestas than any other Mexican hero, living or dead, between 1821 and 1855. His popularity with the masses was indeed great, particularly in the state of Veracruz. As was noted by one British traveler, Santa Anna was "a great territorial lord, a *nong-tong-paw* of the state of Veracruz. Wherever you go, you hear of his name, and are made acquainted with his possessions of every kind."[12] Santa Anna's populism certainly served the all-important purpose of making him figure as "a man of the people." The pilgrimages that were organized to venerate the remains of his amputated leg, buried in the cemetery of Santa Paula on 27 September 1842 with all the pomp and circumstance such an occasion merited, offer a striking sense of the extent to which Santa Anna acquired a Messianic status at the height of his popularity. Although some may deem it controversial to say so, it remains the case that almost anybody who was somebody in independent Mexico was a *santanista* at one point or another. He was actively sought and invited to assume the presidency by a wide range of factions at different junctures, including by radical liberals such as Valentín Gómez Farías (1833 and 1846), moderates such as Ignacio Comonfort,

Copyrighted Material

Mariano Otero, and José Joaquín de Herrera (1847), and conservatives such as Lucas Alamán (1853). There were even British diplomats, such as Percy Doyle, who could not wait for Santa Anna to return to power. As he wrote in a letter to Lord John Russell in 1853: "It is to be hoped that General Santa Anna will come shortly, and that he will be able to restore order in this country, for, should such not be the case, I know of no men of sufficient weight capable of doing so."[13]

What becomes apparent is that there was obviously more to the Santa Anna phenomenon than has been generally acknowledged. A more sober look at his life shows that most of the noted accusations are inaccurate and misleading. They also make it extremely difficult for us to understand this period. If Santa Anna was nothing other than a despicable traitor, turncoat, and tyrant, how can we understand his repeated rise to power, the popularity and influence he enjoyed? Historian Christon I. Archer poignantly asks: "How could a leader survive despite overwhelming defeats as military commander and apparently inexplicable personal political shifts from liberal to reactionary conservative . . . ? If he was an incompetent fool, how could he endure crisis after crisis to regain power? If he was a traitor, how did he avoid the firing squads that terminated the lives of others?"[14] It is worth remembering how he impressed the observant Spanish minister plenipotentiary's Scottish wife, Fanny Calderón de la Barca, who after meeting Santa Anna in December 1839 described him as

> a gentlemanly, good-looking, quietly-dressed, rather melancholy-looking person, with one leg, apparently somewhat of an invalid, and to us the most interesting person in the group. He has a sallow complexion, fine dark eyes, soft and penetrating, and an interesting expression of face. Knowing nothing of his past history, one would have said a philosopher, living in dignified retirement—one who had tried the world, and found that all was vanity—one who had suffered ingratitude, and who, if he were persuaded to emerge from his retreat, would only do so, Cincinnatus-like, to benefit his country.[15]

On meeting him again two years later, in 1841, Madame Calderón de la Barca did not find that she had misjudged him following their

Copyrighted Material

first encounter: "He retains the same interesting, resigned, and rather melancholy expression; the same quiet voice and grave but agreeable manner; and surrounded by pompous officers, he alone looked quiet, gentlemanly and high bred." It was clear to her that Santa Anna was in a league of his own; she noted that his "name has a *prestige*, whether for good or for evil, that no other possesses."[16] Privately she admitted that he was an "energetic robber," but this did not prevent him from being a cut above the rest of his contemporaries.[17] What becomes obvious is that it is important that we rethink the role Santa Anna played in Mexican politics following independence.

Although numerous biographies of Santa Anna exist, it is clear that there is a need for a new study to take on board the findings made in the relevant historiography over the last thirty years; to go beyond the myths that continue to cloud our understanding of the period; to interpret Santa Anna's transformations, paying close attention to the chronology; to focus on his activities in his home province of Veracruz; and to understand his role from the perspective of the period in which he moved.[18]

Santa Anna's long and meaningful relationship with Veracruz deserves to be looked at more closely. Most biographies focus on his activities either in the capital or on the battlefield and eschew the many years he remained out of public scrutiny at his haciendas in Veracruz (Manga de Clavo and El Encero). He spent far more time in Veracruz than he did in Mexico City. Why was he so reluctant to leave Veracruz? Why did he abandon the presidency, time and again, instead of consolidating his rise to power from the capital? If he was truly interested in power itself, would it not have made more sense for him to take hold of the executive with an iron grip? As Conservative ideologue Lucas Alamán stressed to him in March 1853, the Conservative party definitely wanted him to stay in the capital, for they feared that if he retired to Manga de Clavo, as was customary, the government would be left "in hands that may well make a mockery of authority."[19] And what did he do in Veracruz as *hacendado*, military commander-general, state governor, and vice-governor? What policies did he implement in the region? Who were his allies? Which factions did he favor? And how did his political behavior in his bailiwick in Veracruz tally with his actions at a national level?

Copyrighted Material

An aspect of his career that is emphasized in this biography is precisely Santa Anna's success as an important rancher and landowner in Veracruz. This was a key region in the Mexican political economy of the early nineteenth century. His success as a rancher and the critical geopolitical position of his estates were vital in enabling him to become such a major political actor in early republican Mexico. They allowed him to figure as a potentially valuable political ally or as a dangerous political foe by those of his contemporaries who took to the boards of the Mexican political stage following independence.

This is also a biography that builds on my own seventeen-year-long research into the politics of independent Mexico and into the ideas and actions of the santanistas. Concentrating on his most consistent followers and in particular on the political career of Santa Anna's intellectual informer, propagandist, ideologue, and master conspirator, six times Minister of War José María Tornel, I developed an interpretation of the evolving antiparties, antipolitics, and nationalist, populist ideology that the caudillo's movement came to endorse. I have argued that the santanistas did have a political agenda, inferring therefore that Santa Anna did also, even if he was "a man of action, not a political thinker."[20] I have also stressed the importance of chronology in a number of studies, reiterating the point that people change in response to events, experiences, triumphs, and failures. This logic was applied not only to the santanistas but also to a wide range of politicians and factions. Responding to what I have defined as the stages of hope (1821–28), disenchantment (1828–35), profound disillusion (1835–47), and despair (1847–53), santanistas like Tornel went from advocating a radical liberal agenda in the 1820s to defending a diametrically opposed reactionary one in the 1850s. Experience took its toll on the generosity of early beliefs. The time has now come to apply these findings to Santa Anna himself, recognizing that he did uphold a political ideology. Inevitably, Santa Anna's political outlook changed as the experience of the first national decades scarred him, both figuratively and literally.[21]

To a great extent this biography is a reworking of documents that have been studied before in the numerous studies that exist on Santa Anna. It therefore constitutes a fresh look at well-used sources, challenging the hegemonic myths that surround his career and attempting to provide

Copyrighted Material

a balanced account of Santa Anna's contribution to nineteenth-century Mexican politics. Nevertheless, this study does benefit from discoveries made in the "untapped" regional archives of Veracruz, bringing to light new information about Santa Anna's career. It also benefits from the time and opportunity I was awarded to work in the Archivo Histórico of the Mexican Ministry of Defense. Consequently, although this is first and foremost a revisionist biography of Santa Anna, it does offer new insights into the caudillo's life, in particular with regard to his activities in his bailiwick of Veracruz and the numerous military engagements in which he was involved.

This is definitely not a hagiography of Santa Anna. There is no intention here of inspiring the Mexican government to erect a statue in Santa Anna's honor or to persuade local authorities to rename an avenue after him. My main purpose is to understand Santa Anna in a sober, detached, and balanced way. The following pages are thus aimed at doing away with all the clichés and politically motivated myths that obscure our understanding of his actions and decisions. I seek to embrace the latest trends in the historiography and in so doing to provide a revised account of his life, including new insights into his activities in Veracruz. And I aim to bear in mind that he was neither alone nor unique as a Spanish American caudillo and that his political behavior was paralleled by that of other strong leaders of his time.

In brief, the Santa Anna who emerges in this book is neither a diabolical dictator nor a benign selfless patriotic patriarch. He features as the intelligent and contradictory leader that he was; a middle-class *criollo*, high-ranking officer, politician, and hacendado. The stress, if any, is on seeing him as a landowner and as someone who changed, not necessarily for devious aspirational reasons but because his context was one of constant motion, where the solutions that were thought up one day were abandoned the next, in the face of their failure. Santa Anna was not a traitor, nor a turncoat, and not always a tyrant; this is the story of a landowner, general, and political leader who tried to prosper personally *and* help his country develop at a time of severe and repeated crises, as the colony that was New Spain gave way to a young, troubled, besieged, and beleaguered Mexican nation.